

CONSUMER ALERT – HIGH WINTER BILLS

OFFICE OF PEOPLE'S COUNSEL

The weather this winter has been unusually cold – frigid is the word at times, and households have been using a lot more electricity and more fuel to heat their homes. Another serious storm is coming, so we are facing a winter of higher energy bills:

These are some things we know:

- In homes with heat pumps, especially older ones, electricity usage will be way up with temperatures below 30 – 40 degrees.
- In homes with gas, propane or oil heat, the amount of fuel *used* will be higher even if the thermostat is set a little lower, as the heating systems work harder with the colder weather.
 - Gas utility prices did not go up for BGE customers, and only slightly for other utility customers, in January, but prices have increased for BGE and WGL customers for the month of February.
 - The price of oil and propane did go up for deliveries, which will add to the price and bill increases for January and February.
- For customers with alternative gas and electric supplier contracts with a *variable price*, there may be a real jump in the price for electricity or gas for the next few months because of significant increases in the wholesale market prices

Households may have trouble paying the full utility or fuel bills during this time of severe weather. If you are facing this difficulty, OPC encourages you to contact your utility or fuel supplier *before* the bill is due, to try to work out arrangements to pay the high bills *over time*. We also offer the following tips:

- **BGE customers:** BGE is offering a new Budget Billing option for the 2014 winter bills to households with no more than \$500 past due and not already on Budget Billing. This will help you to pay the higher bill over time. See <http://www.bge.com/article%20documents/bgeoffersnewbillingoptionstohelpcustomers1.28.14.pdf> for more information, and contact BGE at 1-800-685-0123 (wait for prompt).

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- **Washington Gas (WGL) customers:** WGL is offering a new payment option for the 2014 winter bills to households with no more than \$500 past due. WGL also offers budget billing and a Payment Extension program (change the due date). See <http://www.businesswire.com/news/washgas/20140204005392/en> for more information, and contact WGL at 1-800-752-7520.
- **Other utilities:** If you are having difficulty paying a high bill, contact your gas or electric utility and ask for a similar option or to be placed on a payment plan to pay the weather-related increase over time.
 - Pepco 1-800-424-8028
 - Delmarva Power and Light 1-800-375-7117
 - Potomac Edison 1-800-255-3443
 - SMECO 1-888-440-3311
- **Low-income customers:** If you have not received energy assistance this year (since July 1, 2013), apply for it immediately. If you are eligible, you may get help with your current electric bill and past-due bill (EUSP) and your heating bill (MEAP). **Call 1-800-352-1446** for more information and a location.
- **Limited income customers, elderly, seriously ill and disabled customers, and those in crisis:** Even if you are not eligible for energy assistance, there may be other resources to assist you. **Call 211** for other programs or organizations or check out:
 - the OPC Resource Guides for your area at http://www.opc.state.md.us/ConsumerCorner/Publications.aspx#Resource_Guide
 - 211 Maryland at <http://www.211md.org/211provider-utility-assistance>.
- **Customers with variable price supplier contracts:** Customers with these contract terms may experience a significant increase in the price of electricity or gas supply. You should check the terms of your supplier agreement to see if there are any restrictions on increases in your energy price, and contact your supplier if you have any questions when you receive your bill. Also, you can check OPC's website for supplier price comparisons if you want to consider fixed price contracts in the future, at <http://www.opc.state.md.us/ConsumerCorner/RetailSuppliers.aspx>.
- **Conservation (if your health allows):** Even if we do not have frigid weather, the cold weather will continue for a few weeks. See some quick ideas to help reduce your heating bills at <http://energy.gov/energysaver/articles/fall-and-winter-energy-saving-tips>.

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- While they may not help with your current bills, you may want to check out the EmPower Maryland energy efficiency and conservation programs. In particular, plan for an audit of your home before the summer heat (or next winter's cold) comes along.
 - BGE www.bge.com 877-685-7377
 - Pepco www.pepco.com 866-353-5798
 - Delmarva www.delmarva.com 866-353-5799
 - Potomac Edison www.firstenergycorp.com 877-928-8928
 - MD DHCD www.dhcd.state.md.us 800-583-8976 (low-income)

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